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AN ITALIAN IN SWEDEN IN XVIII CENTURY: DOMENICO MICHELESSI, (I) by Riccardo Scarcia, University of Roma Tor Vergata

Abbé Domenico Michelessi was born in the small village of Spinetoli (Ascoli Piceno, Marche) in 1735; he worked in Venice, then travelled through Europe writing essays as well as Italian or Latin poems (he got a good success in France, Germany, and Prussia, at the court of Friedrich II: some poems of his were translated into German and French). In his last years he moved from Berlin to Sweden invited by the new King Gustav III, then he became a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences, studied Swedish without any difficulty (they say in six months), so that he soon published an anthology of pieces translated from Greek and Latin into Swedish, and a Latin version of the first official speeches of the King (*Gustavi III, Sueciae Regis, Orationes a Sueco in Latinum versae*, Berlin 1772). His opening lecture as Academician is also remaining (*Inträdes-tal uti Kongl. vetenskap akademien, hållet den 29 julii, 1772, av Abbé Michelessi*, Stockholm 1772). His support to Gustav's policy is confirmed by a brilliant piece justifying the authoritative and unexpected coup d'état by which the King suppressed the 'Riksdag' (the very important *Lettera a Monsignore Visconti, Arcivescovo d'Efeso, sopra la rivoluzione di Svezia, succe-*

duta il 19 agosto 1772, Stockholm 1773, which was immediately printed also in Swedish, at Uppsala, in French, at Stockholm, again in French and German at Greifswald). Michelessi died suddenly in 1773 and was buried in St. James Churchyard (Stockholm). Biographical informations are collected from E. De Tipaldo (editor), *Biografia degli Italiani illustri*, I, Venezia 1834, 162-63, and *Nouvelle Biographie Générale*, XXXV, Paris 1861, 418.

I shall now refer to an interesting poem taken from a posthumous poetic miscellany (Domenico Michelessi, *Poesie*, Fermo 1786, 131-42): quotations of some lines of it always follow the original spelling and printing.

Title of the poem: "Per / l'Ordine Reale di Wasa / istituito da / S.M. Gustavo III. Re di Svezia / il giorno della sua incoronazione [the Coronation Day took place in 1772, on March 29th] / per l'avaloramento (sic) / Dell'Agricoltura, del Commercio, delle / Mine, e delle Arti. / Canto"; it is followed by an alleged quotation from Xenophon's *Memorabilia* ("Lib. 5 Ciro elevava in dignità quelli, le cui terre erano ben abitate, e i campi culti e pieni d'alberi, e di frutti secondo la natura del suolo"): but as book V of *Memorabilia* does not exist and Cyrus' name does not even occur in this work, the quotation is probably made by hearth and the mistake could be explained as a memory failure. Anyway in my opinion the few words are a free abstract of some pages of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, where is always Socrates who is speaking, both of Cyrus the Great and Cyrus the Younger (one could compare ch. IV 15-16, and in addition Cicero, *On Old Age*, 59: Cyrus the Great is introduced as a wise king appreciating agriculture also in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, *passim*): the basic concept of the whole poem derives, on the other hand, from another well known passage of the same writer (see *Oeconomicus*, ch. V), where agriculture is defined as 'Mother and Nurse' of every human art, mediated through many Latin authors (*ex.gr.* Cato the Censor better than the more famous *Georgics* of Virgil, or

the above quoted Cicero).

Just to give an idea of it the contents of the poem could be summarized as follows. To the Agriculture Goddess - accompanied by Abundance (*viz.* Wealth) and Peace - Nurse of Kings and Strength of Kingdoms, King Gustav is about to raise an altar, since without Agriculture no Vertue can survive among us (p.133: "senza te Virtude / fra noi non vive"). Then Michelessi praises the transition of mankind from primitive wild life to the civilized one and to more organized forms of society thanks to the practice of cultivating soil (a typical classical *topos*, in which quite curiously Michelessi also includes the development of pastoral life, because according to the tradition it belonged rather to a previous level of civilisation than to the agricultural one: but this is considered from the artistic point of view, that is, as the origin of the bucolic poetry). 'Pomona' and 'Flora' came also with her: they are pure Latin denominations of the Fruits Goddess and Flowers Goddess. The latter is surely chosen because it offers the opportunity to mention the most important Swedish contemporary scientist (Carl von Linné will die in 1778), whose she is the best Friend, and at the same time the botanical garden of the Uppsala University: so Flora's crown has been made richer with new contributions imported from American Provinces (p.134: "amica di Linneo, che il crin le adorna / d'Americani fior colti in Upsala"). Were she not here, never could the sun have the delicious woods which form the Swedish equivalent of Italian 'Bosco Parrasio' in its view (the Park of 'Arcadia', that is the Roman Academy founded approximatively one hundred years before, by the way, just under the impulse of Christina of Sweden: a courteous but not open compliment to an apostatizing Queen!), and where each of nine Muses enjoys a silent path sacred to her name (*ibid.*: "gli ameni boschi / d'Ekholsund non vedria, ne (sic) scherzerebbe / col suo tremulo lume infra le fronde / del Parnaso novello, ove Gustavo / alle Muse sacrò nove viali"). Note in this image the adaptation to the peculiar trembling light of a forest, where leaves naturally

and continuously move, of a good piece of Virgil's rhetoric (*Aen.* vii 8-9), originally referred to the small waves of a calm sea sparkling under the full moon beams. Nor Queen Mother Ulrika (Lovisa Ulrika of Prussia, widow of the former King Adolf Fredrik, was Friedrich II Hohenzollern's sister) could have built for her daughter (Princess Sofia Albertina) a self-sufficient silkworms factory in the 'Happy Island' (an allusion to Drottningholm, the celebrated island of Mälaren Lake, where Adolf Fredrik built as a present for his wife one of the first European examples of a Cottage in Chinese style, the so called 'Kina slot', mentioned also in another Michelessi's poem as "Mole Cinese"). But Agriculture's benefits are some more.

Peasants are the best warriors (cf. Cato, *On Agriculture*, proem.: "it is from 'agricolae' [literally 'free peasants', or in general 'farming class'] that the bravest men and the strongest and most vigorous soldiers come &c."), not mercenaries: troops hired for military service but serving only for money and always easy to surrender in case of life danger (cf. Petrarch, *To Italy*). These humble labourers are ready to fight, in case of need, for the very soil of their country as well as for their families. And such were in fact the gallant soldiers who got so many victories under the glorious flags of the Gustavs and the Charles in the Northern Seas, where during spring Swedish mariners used to sail before a sweet breeze singing their hymns in honour of Vasa and of Freedom (p.135: "là 've il nocchier pria / con Zeffiro compagno in sulla poppa / GUSTAVO Wasa e Libertà cantava"): memorable battles on frozed water, where sledges and pawing horses raised clouds of powdered ice (cf. the figurative treatment as real 'mirabilia' of suchlike situations, unknown to Mediterranean peoples, in some engraved details of XVI century Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina*). Then, like the fierce Roman did, they came back to their simple farms and to their poor and sober food. And Agriculture was present at Gustav III's coronation: on that day the new king, clad in a blue mantel embroidered with golden crowns, embraced his brothers,

and accepted the official oath of his subjects and of Senate, facing his charming and beautiful wife Sofia Magdalena of Denmark (*ibid.*: "di Maddalena in faccia / dea di beltade").

The fearless Trade over seas is Agriculture's son. It can unify the whole world (cf. the *topoi* of Greek and Latin 'propemptika', and see for instance Manilius' *Astronomica*, v 53-56, text and translation by G.P.Goold: "men born under Argo are the guides who guide our ships over the trackless deep; it is through them that land meets land and the whole world's wares are summoned with the winds to supply men's divers needs"): Trade is what enriches now Gothenburg with its gifts ("Or de' suoi doni / Gottemburgo ei fa ricco"). The Swedish fleet has not to pray ancient divinities (p.137: "di Cipro la possente Diva, / né d'Elena i fratelli, astri lucenti", literally translated from the opening lines of Horace's *Odes* i 3, precisely an excellent example of a 'propemptikon', addressed to Virgil's ship when Virgil was supposed to sail to Greece, maybe for a trade voyage: *Sic te diva potens Cypri, / sic fratres Helenae lucida sidera...*); but the fleet must invoke Gustav's Genius (a mere Roman religious concept: that is, the personal Protector Spirit, so to say a pre-christian Guardian Angel; moreover, by this conventional way and poetically speaking, the King is assimilated to the Roman emperor Augustus, who was conceived on the contrary as a Thaumaturge Sovereign and as a true God on the earth, with the specific power to dominate natural elements). So the Swedish merchantmen will reach easily Eastern Countries sailing from Stockholm through the Baltic Sea, and hugging the opposite coast of Denmark, till the opening of a new amazing route (*ibid.*: "in fin che il sentier nuovo / Wenerno t'apra, e del Waternio amico / ti ponga in sen"), and then over the Oceans. Vänern ("Wenerno") and Vättern ("Waternio") are the two largest lakes of South Sweden and Michelessi represents them like classical river gods hoping to see united 'what Nature has kept divided till today', that is their waters: not an unfounded hope, indeed, for what could'nt the Swedish

skill do? (*ibid.*: "che non può l'arte Sveca?... Con stupor le navi / vedrà *Trolhetta* [viz. *Trollhättan*]", which alludes in epic style to the possibility of digging a navigable canal between broken rocks and cut down trees...: it refers to the modern Göta Canal, which had been planned since the reign of Gustav Vasa, and fully accomplished only in XIX century).

It follows an evocation of the so called 'Chalibes', in a quite long portion (pp. 138-40) dedicated to these secondary Greek mythological beings, personifying the discovering and the promotion of metallurgy: but it appears to be expressly meant to introduce the eulogy of modern miners. They are the descendant and inheritors of the first rebels against foreign domination, who once supported the Great Gustav Vasa, the founder of independent Sweden (p.139: "figli onorati / siete de' prodi che spezzaro i primi / la vil catena e dietro l'orme sue [viz. *Vasa's material footprints, but also Vasa's hints or traces: it seems to me to read here an allusion to Vasa's Long Ski March, the Vasaloppet, which contributed to arise the highlanders against the Danes*] / dalla nevosa ed aspra Dalecarlia scesero ad ingrassar di sangue ostile / d'Upsala i larghi campi"; once more Michelessi in evocating scenes of scandinavian history tries to adapt Latin poetical 'idioms', here from Virgil's *First Georgic*, ll. 491-92, which nevertheless spoke of the tragedy of civil war after Julius Ceasar's death: *sanguine nostro... latos Haemi pinguescere campos*, with the perfect substitution of one proper name for another). Now Swedish miners provide stuffs to an acclaimed French sculptor (the "Gallico Lisippo", whom the foundryman Gerhard Meyer is 'cooking' bronze to, is Jacques-Philippe Bouchardon, who lived for twenty years in Sweden until his death, and was First Sculptor of the King and Academy Director). Let come Fine Arts, too, near Gustav's throne! No one artist will be forced to blend pleasing body details from seven different women in order to obtain the ideal Venus' beauty, like the painter Zeuxis did in Magna Graecia, about 415 B.C. (p.140: not here "com'a Croton, da sette belle / raccor tu

devi le perfette forme"; cf. Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, xi 71): Queen Magdalena is enough, she is really shining like a Love Goddess; then other portraits will follow, and decorate the Royal Hall, *ex.gr.* the beau geste of Prince Carl in a battle field ("Carlo si pinga / col nudo acciaro al pian di *Lagorasgerde*") or Prince Fredrik standing on the fore bridge of his war vessel (*ibid.*). They are both King's brothers with military responsibilities: but it is well-known that the heroic behaviour of Carl, Duke of Södermanland, as commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy was also particularly celebrated by another, more important, Italian contemporary poet, Count Carlo Castone della Torre di Rezzonico (1742-1796), in a poem written for Carl's nomination as a member of Arcadia. As far as it is concerned, Architecture should adorn the private Manor of the King, his personal Buen Retiro, where only he can relax after a long working day spent in public affairs and consecrate himself to his favourite studies (p.141: "l'eletto / ritiro di GUSTAVO, *Haga*, che il rende / al Senato il mattin, la sera il vede / tornar fra l'ombre ai dolci studj in seno").

This is the meaning of the New Vasa Order (Michelessi says). Whoever will consider the old royal Escutcheon or Shield (the same word "scudo" has in Italian primarily a military sense, that explains the parallel with the Latin legend of the *ancile*, but it means also Heraldic Coat-Of-Arms) will also notice the symbolism of its emblem, that is "di spighe biondegianti il denso / manipol, nutritor de' figli" (*ibid.*), the thick sheaf of blond corn in the middle, tied up by a green ribbon, representing of course the figurative translation of the etymological significance of the family name 'Wasa' ('Vasa' is the modern spelling). But one could consider this Coat-Of-Arms as the true *ancile*, and the improvement of Agriculture symbolized by it as the divine warrant of the common wealth of the Nation (the original *ancile*, a sort of totem, according to Roman historians, was a sacred shield which fell from heaven during the reign of Numa Pompilius, when people suffered from a plague: priests having officially said that the future destiny

of the Roman state depended on the strict preservation of it, Numa ordered eleven shields of the same size and form to be made, and to be kept in the temple of Vesta - the hearth of the City - so that no plunderer or enemy might identify the authentic one and destroy the Roman empire by stealing it): without their Father Gustav I barbarism and tyranny would have put back Swedish people to feed again on acorns. It was to remind this that Gustav I seeded the big oak which stands still today respected by Time (p.141: "In tal memoria / a Riboholm egli piantò la quercia / rispettata dal tempo"); and when the seed fell from his fingers a mysterious voice coming from heavens promised him victory and glory provided that every successor of his, named after him, would plant a new oak by his own hand till the definite sanction of Swedish might through the foundation of this Vasa Order by initiative of Gustav III (p.142: "Vincerai, GUSTAVO; / va, l'arbor tuo vivrà cent'anni e cento, / ma per memoria sol di tua pietade [viz. *religious feelings*]. / Per tal memoria pianterà ogni rege, / che prenderà da te lo scettro e il nome, / di sua mano una quercia infin che il chiaro / splendor del sangue tuo GUSTAVO Terzo [where '*chiaro*' means both '*bright*' and '*illustrious*', viz. '*splendor of thy blood*'] / istituisca un dì l'ordin di Wasa"). Unfortunately Gustav III was a rather despotic ruler, in spite of his illuministic education, and was killed in a Palace conspiracy about twenty years later (but Michelessi, as we know, was luckily dead!). By chance, the transfigured event of this assassination became very popular in Italy because of the original plot of Verdi's Opera (1859) *Un Ballo in Maschera* (titled exactly *Gustavo III*, then anonymously *Un Ballo in Maschera*, from the Scribe's Libretto *Gustave III ou Le Bal Masqué*, and successively *La Vendetta in Domino*, but at the end completely changed by the censorship to the improbable love story of a British Governor of Boston in the previous century).

Michelessi's poem is obviously a standard one (there are many of the same kind - written in 'blank verse' or "endecasillabi sciolti" - in Italy in the last decades of XVIII

century commending 'exotic' culture, especially in Florence or Venice, although most of them are dedicated to English institutions): the author is a cultivated man according to the average of his times, when the normal way to exchange political or scientific opinions among intellectuals was to write versified 'epistles' or 'cantoos'; but we must admit that his poetic style and all his phraseology have a not quite usual elegance and a specific melodic sound.



EDIZIONI POSTILLATE DI GIOVANNI E OLAO MAGNO IN ALCUNE BIBLIOTECHE EMILIANE

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Giovanni e Olao Magno, arcivescovi di Upsala, sono rimasti celebri per aver scritto monumentali lavori sulla storia delle genti nordiche, svedesi e finniche. Di Giovanni è la *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sueonumque regibus qui unquam ab initio nationis extitere, eorumque memorabilibus bellis* edita a Roma «apud I.M. De Viottis» nel 1554 (Brunet 3,1302); di Olao la *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus eorumque diversis statibus, conditionibus, moribus, ritibus, superstitionibus, disciplinis, exercitiis, regimine, victu, bellis, structuris, instrumentis ac mineris metallicis et rebus mirabilis* edita a Roma, presso lo stesso tipografo De Viottis, nel 1555 (Brunet 3,1302), oltre ad una *Additio de vita et moribus quorundam Principum tam externorum quam internorum* compresa nell'edizione della *Historia* di Giovanni uscita presso il tipografo Zacharias Schurerus nel 1617.

Ambedue le *Historiae* che, nel loro testo, mantenevano la promessa della grande mole di notizie "esotiche" che prospettavano nel titolo, ebbero un'immediato successo e furono pubblicate e tradotte più volte, e la richiesta dei lettori, spesso messi in difficoltà dai formati di *principes* e ristampe